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ABSTRACT

This Child Development Associate (CDA) training module focuses on the staff's role in creating and maintaining a child-oriented learning environment for preschool children. An Environment Checklist is provided to help CDA interns assess the richness of their classroom environments before and after completing the training module. Module objectives, suggested activities for each objective, and an assessment checklist are presented in a single format. Topics discussed in the study guide section include: (1) the child-oriented learning environment as a combination of indoor, outdoor, and community resources; (2) advantages of the child-oriented learning environment for teachers, staff, and children; (3) elements included within the indoor physical space; (4) suggestions for utilizing physical space; (5) outdoor space as an extension of the classroom; (6) the role of the community environment in contributing to the total learning environment for preschool children; (7) the use of learning center materials in creating a child-oriented learning environment; (8) the staff's role in setting up and maintaining a child-oriented learning environment; and (9) suggestions for revitalizing the indoor learning environment. Resources for further study are presented. (JMB)

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Competency Based Training Module #1

THE PRESCHOOL CHILD'S TOTAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

by

Susan Pintchovski
and
Stefanie Workman

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NOTE TO THE INTERN:

This CDA training module has been prepared as a guide for you and your CDA Advisor to help you to develop certain practical skills necessary for your work in an early childhood center. Although it contains many useful ideas, it is not intended to be a self-study program. Many decisions about your training experiences are left up to you and your CDA Advisor. The activities given in this module are "suggested" activities, and should be used if they are appropriate to your learning needs. You or your Advisor may come up with other activities more appropriate for your particular situation, children, or background of experience and training.

Your Advisor will evaluate your performance in each of the objectives. S/he may do so right away on the basis of skills you already have, or s/he may evaluate you after you have done some learning activities, or both. If you think you already have the skills required by some of the objectives, you should ask to be evaluated right away. You may not have to do any activities for some of the objectives. You do, however, have to demonstrate the required skills for your advisor; you cannot just tell s/him that you have the skills. If your advisor has already observed some of the skills before you entered this module, s/he may check you off on those skills without further observation.

When your Advisor has evaluated your performance in an objective area as satisfactory, s/he will initial and date that objective as completed in your copy of this module. When all of the objectives have been initialled, you have completed the requirements of this module and have earned credit. Keep this module as your permanent record of completion, and as a reference to use in your classroom.

As you can see, how fast you are able to complete this module depends on a lot of things: how much time and effort you can put into it; how much help your Advisor can give you; how much experience and training you have already had.

The Arizona/Nevada HSST/CDA Program hopes that you find your participation in CDA a valuable and practical training experience. We would appreciate any suggestions you may have for improvements in the training program and in this module.

THE PRESCHOOL CHILD'S TOTAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

CDA TRAINING MODULE #1

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....Page 1

ENVIRONMENT CHECKLIST.....Page 2

OBJECTIVES, ACTIVITIES, ASSESSMENT.....Page 5

STUDY GUIDE.....Page 11

ENVIRONMENT CHECKLIST.....Page 26

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY.....Page 29

This Module relates to the following CDA Functional Areas:

1 - Safe

3 - Environment

13 - Staff

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THE PRESCHOOL CHILD'S TOTAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

INTRODUCTION

Many times you have heard people say: "play is child's work", but have you ever stopped to think what this means to you as an early childhood teacher, one who is fundamental in shaping the learning enviornment. As active learners, preschool children learn best when they become totally involved in an activity of their own choosing. Moreover, preschool children will direct themselves according to their individual interests to explore, manipulate, and discover the world around them. Teachers must respect the right and need of preschoolers to be "doers" when in the process obtaining those skills necessary for fostering self-learning. The teacher's role is to serve as a guide or resource person in s/his interactions with children. The teacher encourages children to develop those skills for independent learning.

This philosophy of learning can be implemented in a total learning environment which meets the needs of individual children possessing different rates and styles of learning. Teachers can best ensure that a child is learning at school by providing planned and well-organized learning centers that allow a child to become involved in spontaneous play. Spontaneous play is fostered by the teacher's knowledgeable selection of materials and activities. This well thought-out environment frees the teacher and staff to observe, assess and evaluate or to actively participate with the children.

In addition to the indoor learning environment, both the outdoors and the community serve as sources of materials, activities and experiences. These three components, together, make up the total learning environment. A variety and richness of materials and experiences within these various settings will encourage active learning. A carefully planned environment which is sensitive to the needs of each child helps to create a secure and positive atmosphere in which children and adults become equal partners in the learning process.

Before you go any further with this Module, complete the Environment Checklist on the following pages. This checklist is designed to help you to measure the richness of your classroom environment. It should not be considered an evaluation of your own skills, but should help you understand your center environment so that you can decide where improvements may be made. If you are an assistant teacher or aide, and are not directly responsible for the center environment, you should discuss any changes or improvements you wish to make with the teacher or center director.

After you have finished working with this Module, complete the checklist again, then compare your responses with the first ones.

ENVIRONMENT CHECKLIST

STUDY GUIDE SECTION III	YES	NEEDS IMPROVEMENT
1. Is there sufficient space for children to actively manipulate, explore and move around freely?	☐	☐
2. Does the movement of any children within the indoor room space interfere with other children's on-going activities?	☐	☐
3. Are there any areas within the room where the children tend to engage in non-constructive activities or behaviors?	☐	☐
4. Is wall space provided for both teacher and child (eye-level) use?	☐	☐
5. Is the room comfortable, warm, and friendly from the children's point of view?	☐	☐
6. Can noisy and quiet activities go on together without disturbing one another?	☐	☐
7. Are ceilings, windows and doors incorporated into the learning environment?	☐	☐
STUDY GUIDE SECTION IV		
8. Are activity and learning centers well-defined so that children know how these areas are to be used?	☐	☐
9. Is there a variety of learning centers which allow children to direct their learning at their own pace and style?	☐	☐
STUDY GUIDE SECTION V		
10. Is the outdoors used as an extension of the classroom?	☐	☐
11. Are activity areas, such as woodworking, block construction and creative media, set up outside as a regular part of the daily schedule?	☐	☐
12. Is the outdoors used throughout the day as a part of the total learning environment?	☐	☐

	YES	NEEDS IMPROVEMENT
STUDY GUIDE SECTION VI		
13. Are both spontaneous (informal) and planned visits made into the community?	☐	☐
14. Do community people visit the preschool environment to share their talents, skills and time with the children?	☐	☐
15. Do you and other staff obtain free or inexpensive materials from the community resources (parents, industry, public agencies)?	☐	☐
STUDY GUIDE SECTION VII		
16. Is there variety and richness of materials and equipment for children?	☐	☐
17. Do the materials call on the different abilities, skills, and interests of the children?	☐	☐
18. Do the materials throughout the room represent the cultural and ethnic background(s) of your children?	☐	☐
19. Is there a variety of materials for children to use to practice a particular skill?	☐	☐
20. Are materials added and exchanged to provide for new play experiences?	☐	☐
STUDY GUIDE SECTION VIII		
21. Do the learning centers meet the individual needs and interests of all the children?	☐	☐
22. Do the children have long, uninterrupted blocks of time to become actively involved with the materials?	☐	☐
23. Are materials organized in designated areas, to allow children to find and care for the materials independently?	☐	☐
24. Do you and other staff keep materials and equipment in good condition?	☐	☐
25. Do the materials function in ways they are designed for, and do they appear durable and solid?	☐	☐
26. Are new materials introduced with good timing according to need, interest, and ability?	☐	☐

	YES	NEEDS IMPROVEMENT
27. Is the physical environment well-organized to allow the Intern and other staff to spend most of their time in observing or participating with children?	☐	☐
28. Do adults act as resource people, encouraging children to resolve their own problems?	☐	☐
29. Are children encouraged to learn from each other?	☐	☐
30. Are children given opportunities to learn by exploring, discovering, and experimenting, rather than by receiving direct answers to their questions?	☐	☐
31. Are children encouraged to be independent and to direct their own learning?	☐	☐
32. Do the children have many self-corrective, as well as open-ended (versatile) materials to use independently?	☐	☐
STUDY GUIDE SECTION IX		
32. Are new learning centers added on either a temporary or permanent basis?	☐	☐
33. Are children encouraged to supply or make some of their own materials?	☐	☐
34. Are certain versatile (open-ended) materials re-located to other learning centers to stimulate new uses?	☐	☐

OBJECTIVES, ACTIVITIES, ASSESSMENT

CDA Intern's Name_____

Date of Entry_____Date of Completion_____

OBJECTIVES	SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES
1. The Intern will be able to identify the various aspects of a child-oriented learning environment. ASSESSMENT _____ date/initial	1. Read Section I of the Study Guide. a. Describe each of the three components of a total learning environment for children. b. Review with your Advisor the factors which help to determine a good learning environment. In what ways does a child-oriented learning environment help children to direct their own learning? c. Observe another classroom within your center or at another center and note the quality of the learning environment.
2. The Intern will be able to discuss the values of a child-oriented learning environment for children and adults. ASSESSMENT _____ date/initial	2. Read Section II of the Study Guide. a. Discuss the advantages of a child-oriented learning environment for teachers and staff. b. List some of the values this kind of environment has for children. c. Record for three days how much time you and your staff spend in custodial chores and in preparing for activities while the children are present. Discuss your findings with your Advisor.
3. The Intern will demonstrate a knowledge of the physical indoor room space. ASSESSMENT _____ date/initial	3. Read Section III of the Study Guide. a. List the kinds of spaces which make up the indoor room environment. b. Draw a diagram of the indoor room space labelling learning center spaces, traffic pathways, and areas which serve as dual-purpose spaces. Include furniture arrangements, noting those pieces of furniture which are moved during the day's activities. Also note teacher and child bulletin board space.

OBJECTIVES	SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES
	c. Using your diagram, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of your indoor space giving special consideration to the following factors: traffic pathways, dead space and dual-purpose space. Make any necessary improvements.
	d. What are some suggestions for utilizing the window, door and ceiling spaces in your room? Discuss these with your Advisor and try them out.
4. The Intern will demonstrate a knowledge of the learning center space.	4. Read Section IV of the Study Guide.
	a. Set up learning centers within your room if none exist with the aid of the following list. Determine the size of these new learning centers or evaluate those of existing ones in consideration of the types of activities, the interests of the children, and their location.
	- Block and Construction
	- Music and Listening
	- Science
	- Math
	- Manipulative
	- Dramatic Play
	- Creative Media
	- Large Muscle
	- Woodworking
	- Sand and Water
	- Library
ASSESSMENT	b. Observe your learning centers during a one-week period carefully noting the average number of children using each center. Experiment with the size of one of these centers and discuss with your Advisor your reasons for altering the space of the learning center.
_____ date/initial	

OBJECTIVES	SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES
	c. Guide the children using learning centers in maintaining the number permitted in each one by using understandable visual cues.
5. The Intern will use the outdoor space as an integral part of the total learning environment. ASSESSMENT _____ date/initial	5. Read Section V of the Study Guide. a. Review your lesson plans for the past month and list all activities occurring outside. Discuss these with your Advisor. b. Select 3-5 activities to be carried out each day, outside, over a one-week period, either to supplement outdoor time or to be used during learning center time. Discuss your observations and the reaction of the children as well as any difficulties you may have encountered. c. Choose one indoor large-group activity (for example, story time, snack time, circle time) to be conducted outdoors during its regularly scheduled time. Discuss how the activity went with your Advisor.
6. The Intern will utilize the community and its aspects in a total integration of the child's learning environment. ASSESSMENT _____ date/initial	6. Read Section VI of the Study Guide. a. Discuss with your Advisor why it is necessary to give children experiences with the community's resource people, materials and social settings. b. List needed materials that you can involve yourself, the staff, community people, parents and the children in collecting. Plan ways to begin this collection and carry out your plans. c. Plan and carry out 2 of the following with your children: - Arrange for a person from the community to visit the children at school to share a skill and/or an expertise. - Informally visit with a local community setting or resource person. - Make a formal field trip with all the nesessary pre-arrangements, preparation activities and follow-up.

OBJECTIVES	SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES
	Discuss with your Advisor your plans and after the activities are completed evaluate them with s/him.
	d. Review the past month's activities and think of the kinds of spontaneous visits you took with the children, out into the neighborhood. Talk about these visits with your Advisor.
	e. Start a file of community resources. Include resource people, sources for resource materials, and places to visit.
7. The Intern will choose and set up materials in a way that exhibits a working understanding of the child-oriented environment.	7. Read Section VII of the Study Guide.
	a. Choose 3 of the following developmental skills and for each, list all the materials and activities you have in your classroom that offer practice in this area. Note how many of each material you have. After making this list, next to each material, determine what level(s) of ability the material can be used for - beginning development, middle, or advanced.
	- Classifying - sorting, matching.
	- Sound discrimination.
	- Pouring.
	- Cooperation between 4 children.
	- Directing hostile feelings in a socially acceptable way.
	Discuss with your Advisor.
	b. Evaluate your supply of materials in each learning center, answering the following questions:
	- Are there enough materials?
	- Is there a variety of materials
	. for different types of activities?
	. for different interests?
	. for practicing skills at simple and more complex levels?
ASSESSMENT	
_____ date/initial	

OBJECTIVES	SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES
	- Are there some familar materials? - Are there some newly introduced? - Are there materials that are culturally relevant? - Are there materials that extend acquired concepts and skills? Expand your supply in the areas that show a deficiency or need for improvement.
	c. Choose one versatile (open-ended) material that is regularly found in one learning center, and relocate it into two other learning centers. Relocate the material into each learning center for at least 3 days. Observe the amount of interest in the material and the different ways the children found to use it. Plan to continue this with other materials.
8. The Intern will demonstrate an ability to provide for and utilize learning centers. ASSESSMENT _____ date/initial	8. Read Section VIII of the Study Guide. a. Identify from your observations and assessment of the children in your classroom a topic, skill, or interest around which you can organize a new learning center or improve on an existing one. - Write objectives telling how the children will accomplish the skills or acquire the information and how they will apply it. - Collect the needed materials and display them in the learning center or learning centers. - Present and introduce the materials. - Facilitate learning and evaluate the learning center's work ability and the children's behavior. b. Plan and carry out a small group activity using one of your learning centers.

OBJECTIVES	SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES
	c. Choose one of the following learning centers and plan activities that will extend your week's objectives: - Music and Listening Center - Block Area - Dramatic Play Area
9. The Intern will revitalize the indoor learning environment. ASSESSMENT _____ date/initial	9. Read Section IX of the Study Guide. a. Of the eleven suggestions given for revitalizing the indoor learning environment, choose and carry out at least 8 changes (you may count those done in the previous objectives) over a period of 2-4 weeks. Discuss with your Advisor the effects of any changes on the staff and children. b. Show any changes, additions or removals of learning centers, and any space arrangements made throughout this Module, on a layer of tracing paper over the original room diagram. c. Complete the Environment Checklist again. Include those areas still needing improvement in your Implementation Plan under Objective #10.
10. The Intern will make an Implementation Plan, stating how the skills and information gained through completing this Module will be incorporated in s/his ongoing teaching. ASSESSMENT _____ date/initial	10. Review with your Advisor the new skills you have gained in planning and providing for a good total learning environment. Make an implementation plan, answering these questions: a. What skills (eg. utilizing indoor room space, the community, and the outdoors; choosing and setting up materials; providing for learning centers and revitalizing indoor learning environment) will you be using in your regular teaching? b. What schedule will you use in incorporating these new skills? (How often will you add or change learning centers and materials indoors and out? How often will you make contact with the community?) c. When do you want to review your implementation progress with your Advisor? Insert your Implementation Plan into your CDA Portfolio and refer to it periodically to check your own progress.

THE PRESCHOOL CHILD'S TOTAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

STUDY GUIDE

I. The learning environment for young children.

A. Every experience a child has, whether it happens inside or outside the physical school setting, helps a child to add to his own collection of information and knowledge. Since children are experiential learners (they learn by "doing"), the best program is one which uses planned and spontaneous activities to help a child to discover things about himself and the world in which he lives. The teacher needs to provide a total learning environment for the child; one that includes: The indoor - room environment - (focus on general room space, learning center space and materials), the outdoor - play area environment - (focus on playground and/or additional outdoor space, materials and equipment), and the community - (focus on the physical and social setting, resource people and materials).

B. What is a child-oriented learning environment?

1. Some points one may look for to determine this are:

a. A diversity of materials.

b. A richness of materials which are intended for the children to use to direct their own experiences.

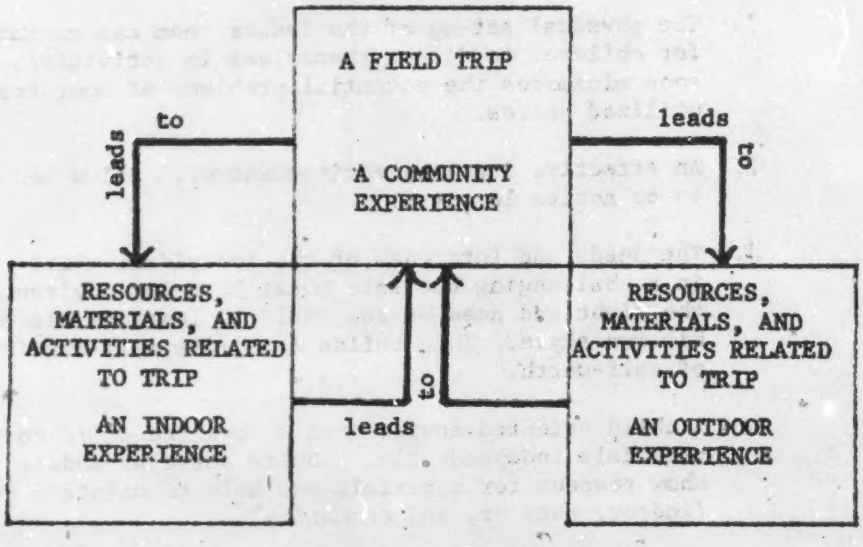
c. Coordination of materials with developing concepts.

d. A total child environment that is organized into activity areas which are understood and inviting to children.

e. General room and activity area arrangements which allow for positive and creative work and play efforts by the child.

f. The Intern aids and encourages the learning process. S/he acts as a partner with the individual child in learning. S/he helps to incorporate manipulative materials and resources to lead a child in active, self-directed learning.

g. Each component of the total learning environment (indoor - outdoor - community) is constantly effecting and influencing the others. The integration of these 3 components offers an optimal learning setting for the child. This integration can be seen graphically in the chart below (using a field trip as an example). (Follow the arrows)



II. A child oriented learning environment is valuable to both the teacher and staff, and the children.

A. Some values or advantages to the teacher (and staff) may be:

1. A daily plan, and a well thought-out environment can enable the teacher (and staff) to apply their time and energy in observations, assessments and evaluation of the activities and the children's behavior and/or in active participation with an individual child's or a small group's learning experience.

2. Custodial chores will be made easier and simpler if one has clean-up equipment readily available to be used by children and staff in activity areas requiring clean-up. (For example: Creative media experiences are located near a sink. Mops and sponges are readily available for water play spills.)

3. If you carefully plan objectives, and select materials for each activity area, the learning environment will provide you with additional ways to help children acquire appropriate developmental skills.

4. The adults in the classroom are freed to a certain extent from being the "providers of all knowledge". Some teacher-structured/directed experiences (for example: circle time, small groups) are valid but the setting up of a child-oriented environment places an emphasis on the children directing their own learning and selecting from a variety of possible experiences. In this type of setting, the teacher's role is one of facilitator.

B. Some values or advantages to the children when a child-oriented learning environment is provided may be:

1. The physical set-up of the indoor room can maximize the opportunities for children to direct themselves in activities. A well organized room minimizes the potential problems of poor traffic flow and under-utilized spaces.

2. An effective learning environment will allow and encourage children to be active learners.

3. The needs and interests of the individual child can be provided for in a challenging but safe total learning environment. It recognizes the right and need of the child to learn at his own pace and in his own style. This builds a child's self-confidence and feelings of self-worth.

4. A child-oriented environment allows the child to use and care for materials independently. Adults serve as models in the way they show respect for materials and help to maintain the environment (indoor, outdoor, and community).

5. Children can feel secure and function comfortably within a room which is organized by adults who are sensitive to their changing needs throughout the year.

6. Careful consideration of the arrangement of activity and learning centers will reduce unnecessary conflict between areas as well as between children in an area.

III. The physical indoor space reflects the program's goals and the teacher's attitudes and philosophies of learning. Facilities may include some permanent and undersirable building features which must be worked with and around. The set-up and arrangement of the early childhood setting communicates to the children the learning styles that will be accepted, encouraged and respected. Elements included within the physical indoor space are:

A. Space occupied by furniture and equipment (horizontal and vertical).

1. Sometimes adults will want to use furniture and equipment to make certain areas of the room less accessible to children when this is a desirable situation. For instance - to prevent access to unused staircases or radiators.

2. Furniture and equipment can also serve to provide children with a feeling of privacy as well as helping to define the activity areas. However, in some cases, the height of furniture may prevent easy

adult supervision along with causing uneasiness among certain children using that area. Observe and be alert to what is comfortable for you and your children.

3. Furniture and equipment which is intended for adult use only (i.e. the teacher's desk) may be unnecessarily occupying play space that the children could otherwise use.

B. Floor space.

1. Providing for a large area (even if this is created by moving furniture) is essential for allowing children to engage in indoor large muscle activity.

2. Consider the amount of square feet you have per child. The State Department of Health has space requirements for child care programs. In addition, when larger numbers of children are present, one must also provide a larger amount of empty space (unoccupied by furniture and equipment) per child.

3. The advantages and disadvantages of carpeting and area rugs should be considered. Carpets can provide warmth to floor surfaces, add color and texture experiences, and muffle excess noise. Carpets or floor coverings may hamper easy clean-up (paint and juice spills), can distort sound experiences (eg. blocks falling on a hard surface), and if not frequently cleaned can be a source of health problems. Perhaps the best floor surface may have a combination of coverings - carpet, area rugs, tile, wood and linoleum.

C. Dead space.

1. Dead space is a large area in the room or yard which fails to suggest to children acceptable play activities and to define for children that area's purpose in the room. Dead space often requires adults to redirect children who are involved in disorganized running and rough-housing into more constructive play at activity areas.

2. Some suggestions to eliminate dead space are:

a. Create within this space, an additional activity area or learning center.

b. Enlarge existing play areas permanently into this space.

c. Extend play activities organized from a learning center into this space.

d. Rearrange funiture and activity areas so as to convert this large dead space into a clear pathway.

D. Dual-purpose space.

1. When space is at a premium, as in small rooms, flexibility in adapting areas for more than one use is essential. Tables are a common example of dual-purpose space. Within the daily routine, tables may be used

for mealtimes, creative media activities, or small group work (although small groups are often found in other arrangements, ie. on floors and/or in learning centers).

2. Teachers and adults can help children understand how this dual-purpose space is to be used during the day. They should familiarize the children with the daily schedule so as to avoid confusion about when to use certain materials in this space.

3. Be flexible in your willingness to rearrange furniture when needed. Opening up an area, pushing tables back, can create a large space for gross motor activites. Where a large space already exists, dividing up this area for small groups or individuals can offer additional activities at option time.

E. Traffic flow and pathway spaces.

1. In creating paths necessary for safe traffic flow and for easy accessibility to activity areas, indoors and out, consideration of how these paths appear at the child's eye-level is important. A child should be able to see how to move from one area to another and also be able to see what areas are actually present in the room or yard.

2. Equipment or furniture that extends into path space, restricts movement and can cause children to bump into each other. Safety considerations in the placement of furniture and creating large enough pathways minimizes accidents.

3. Good pathways eliminate the need for children to interfere and disturb on going activities both indoors and out, by directing traffic flow around these areas.

F. Wall/door/ceiling and window spaces.

1. Wall space should be provided for both teacher and child use. In addition to displaying children's artwork, bulletin boards can be used by the children themselves to put up their own work.

2. Wall space can provide additional working areas for children and offer a different type of spatial experience (eg. wall murals).

3. Doors can also be incorporated into the wall space of a room for both functional and decorative purposes. Outside play or bathroom tags hung on the door can help the teacher and teaching staff to be aware of each child's activity. Doors can also be used for parents' bulletin boards and notices.

4. Windows can provide varied light and color experiences. Colored cellophane paper and different materials ranging from transparency to opaqueness can cover windows to let in different kinds of light. Covering windows with cut-out shapes can provide square, triangular or round window treatments.

5. Ceilings can be utilized in many ways all of which provide new experiences in space. Preschool children need to become aware of the space above their heads as well as their space at eye-level.

Mobiles and dropped ceiling effects are an attractive way to display art or to enrich a concept.

G. Learning Center space.

Section IV will deal with the learning center space.

IV. The extent to which learning centers are used and how well they are employed will be a reflection of the teacher's philosophy of learning and the program's goals. A child-oriented philosophy of learning recognizes that children are active learners— they learn by doing; need to direct themselves in activities; and possess individual interests, styles, and rates of learning. In practice, this philosophy will utilize a variety of learning centers as a major focus of the total learning environment. A learning center or interest area is an organized collection of activities and related materials that develop around a topic, skill(s) and/or subject. In setting up the learning center, some suggestions for utilizing the physical space are:

A. Boundaries should be clearly defined so that they are understandable to children. Boundaries may be formed by the use of shelving units, rugs, dividers or screens, and walls.

1. Clear boundaries help to set up the limits of a child's play space.

2. Well-defined learning centers establish mini-enviroments.

3. Clear boundaries promote continuous play within an area by reducing interferences from noise, visual distraction, and other children.

B. The size of learning centers:

1. The amount of space a learning center occupies will be partly determined by the type of activities found there. For example, the block areas require more space per child than do library areas.

2. The desired number of children in any one learning center will also influence the size.

3. The size of each learning center may vary throughout the year, depending on the teacher's objectives, the interests of the children, and the addition of new learning centers.

C. The location of learning centers:

1. The arrangement of learning centers will be affected by the noise level that characterizes each learning center. Certain learning centers will have louder levels of sound than others. A rule of thumb is to group those learning centers with similar noise levels together.

2. Learning centers should be placed near those features or facilities of the room that promote the smooth functioning of activities (eg. easels placed close to the sink and paint and storage areas). Equipment that is movable or transportable may be situated near the door, so as to make this equipment accessible to either the indoor or outdoor environment.

3. Certain physical indoor features that are usually permanent (eg. plugs, radiators, built-in wall units, and doors), may limit the organization and placement of your learning centers.

D. The number of children in each learning center:

1. A feasible number of children in any one learning center is determined by the type of activity, the variety and richness of materials, and the physical space within the learning center itself.

2. Visual cues located in each learning center help to remind the children of the number limits. Some visual cues are:

a. The number of chairs put out for an activity.

b. The number of drawn faces posted.

c. The limited number of "entry necklaces" at a learning center.

They serve to direct children without adult reminders and help them function independently.

V. Included in the outdoor space is the area directly in front of the classroom or building, as well as the playground. Sometimes these two spaces are the same, however, very often playgrounds occupy an area further away from the actual classroom. Either way the outdoor space is an extension of the classroom and an integral part of the total learning environment.

A. The extension of learning centers to the immediate outdoors and/or playground area — outdoor learning center time may occur simultaneously with indoor learning center time or at the separately scheduled outdoor time.

1. Certain material, and equipment, due to the ease with which they can be moved, often form the basis of outdoor learning centers. Examples are: easel and other painting activities, water play table/tubs, and woodworking bench and tools.

2. Less frequently found are such activities as — blockbuilding, dramatic play (dress-ups, cartons, props), creative movement.

B. If the weather is good, the outdoor environment can be used throughout the whole day.

1. Various routines or activities can be enjoyed out of doors, for example, mealtime, storytime, or circletime.

2. Once children are familiar with the indoor space and materials, an entire day may be spent outdoors.

C. Supplementing playground activities:

1. One of the ways to supplement playground facilities is with the addition of learning centers stationed outside.

2. Creative materials can be used either by themselves or in combination with the existing structures. For example, musical instruments may

be used by a group of children to form a band or parade or individual children may choose to experiment with sounds using their instruments on the surrounding natural environment and man-made equipment.

(NOTE: for some specific ideas on expanding the use of the outdoor environment, refer to the Supplement of Module #26 - Large Muscle Development.)

VI. A part of the child's total learning environment is the community, which includes resource people and materials, and informal and formal interaction with various social institutions. The assets of the community should be utilized as frequently as possible since the community: Can provide additional sources for developing cultural pride and positive self-image; offers the children various socialization experiences with groups other than their immediate peers; exposes children to people of various ethnic, cultural and social backgrounds; helps children to understand how their world is organized and functions; and, enriches the indoor and outdoor environments of the preschool setting.

A. Community resource people can come from the immediate school center (school cook, secretary), the Headstart community (parents, Headstart nurse), the local community (grocery store owner, gas station manager, post office), or the larger community (zoo, museum, airport). These resource people can become a part of the child's total learning environment in several ways:

1. They can visit the child's school environment to share their skills and expertise, along with those materials related to their work.

2. They can make informal visits to the center to participate in the daily program.

3. The people included in the school, Headstart and local community can serve as the source of frequent and informal visits for the children.

4. More formal and elaborately prepared visits may be made with those people of the larger community.

B. Resource materials:

1. Teachers can supplement their supply of materials by obtaining donated, loaned, or inexpensive resources (eg. carpet samples, library books and flea market bargains). Parents often become a reliable source for contributions.

2. Children can contribute their "beautiful junk", thereby incorporating their materials into the program.

3. Teachers can obtain materials for in-class experiences from the field trip site in advance (for example — teachers can obtain from a local supermarket decorative food pictures to be used by the children). Follow-up experiences may use those materials which the children received on the field trip.

C. Interactions with institutions may range from informal visits to the local park or the neighborhood store, to more formal visits to an ice cream factory, or to a fire station.

1. Flexible scheduling allows for spontaneous visits arising from immediate needs or interests on the part of the children. For example, a deflated ball might need a patch and air from the gas station, or the commotion arising from street repairs outside the school building may spark an interest to investigate the situation.

2. Formal field trips consist of making initial arrangements by staff, the teacher planning and carrying out related activities prior to the field trip, the actual field trip, and follow-up experiences with the children and staff.

3. Be aware that field trips may have learning outcomes for children which are not teacher-intended, nor desired. For example — a visit to a soda-bottling company may indirectly "tell" children that soda pop is a healthy, acceptable drink.

(NOTE: See Modules #12 - The Early Childhood Program and the Community and #19 - Field Trips.)

The indoor and outdoor learning environment is influenced primarily by the teachers and staff who must set it up and work with the children in their program. However, the degree to which they can arrange furniture, equipment, and materials will be partly affected by the physical forms of the school. Having discussed the physical indoor space and outdoor setting, it is now necessary to study <u>how</u> one creates a child-oriented learning environment, by considering two points — Materials and the Teachers'/Adults' Roles.

VII. Materials form the basis of each learning center. When chosen and presented carefully, they help the learning center to function as a "teacher" so that the child can self-direct his work and play, individually or in a small group. The materials in a learning center should present, reinforce and extend learning about a particular concept or skill that the child needs to develop. Materials must be sensitive to a child's interests, style and pace of learning.

A. There needs to be a richness of materials so that sharing is not always necessary. Consider the number of children expected to use the materials. Are there enough materials and equipment available in each learning center and throughout the room so that each child has several <u>real</u> choices of activities he may become involved in during activity time?

B. A variety of materials is very important. Variety means that the materials offer differences in the kind of activity a child may take part in: matching, building, painting, listening, etc.

1. When there are different types of activities and materials available, children can more easily make their own choices about what to play with.

2. A variety of materials recognizes that each child has special needs, likes, and dislikes, and that these may change from day to day, and week to week.

3. Children develop at different rates and in different areas - physical, emotional, social, cognitive, and language. Materials must be set out that allow a child to practice developmental skills that he will need to further his growth as a person. Some materials and equipment will be simpler for those children who are younger in their abilities. Some will be more complex and difficult for more advanced children. Both simple and complex are needed in each learning center because children need a feeling of success from materials they can master, and a feeling of challenge from those materials that require longer and harder effort and practice.

4. Observation of the children can tell a teacher when they are comfortable and familar with certain materials and when they are ready to further extend the concepts and skills they acquired. Appropriate materials should then be introduced which renew the children's interests and encourage them to use the knowledge they have acquired to discover and learn more.

5. The materials in your room should also be a mixture of familar play-things and new or less explored toys. Children need the stability and security of playing with old, well-known materials, as well as the stimulation from new and less often used equipment.

6. Materials in every learning center and throughout the room should reflect the diversity of cultural and ethnic backgrounds of the children in the class. Incorporating these materials into the program can reinforce a child's own cultural identity as well as create an evironment that respects individual and familial differences.

7. Give children a variety of materials and equipment that provides practice on a particular skill. For example, building and balancing should be experienced not only with blocks — wooden, paperbag, plastic, cardboard, table — but with stacking cans, cartons, and crystal climbers, as well as whole-body movements (ie. walking a balance beam or rope, standing on one foot, using tin can stilts, etc.)

C. In a classroom of similar aged children, there may be great differences in social skills and abilities to interact with other children. Considering this, materials at the learning centers must allow for several types of play. Provide activities and materials that give the child a choice to:

1. Play by himself (isolated or solitary play).

2. Play next to or near other children, using the same kinds of materials, but not playing with the other children (parallel play).

3. Play with other children and work toward a common goal (cooperative play).

Being aware of the types of play a child is capable of and setting out appropriate materials and activities will help him to develop and advance his social skills.

D. Where you place the materials in a learning center will communicate to the child where and how to use them:

1. Put the materials within the corresponding learning center area where they are to be played with.

2. All materials that are physically accessible to a child, he should be allowed to use.

3. Shelves that are open on both the front and back sides and divide two activity areas encourage the materials on those shelves to be used in both locations. If this is not desired, then change the shelf unit to one with a closed back, or only put materials on the shelf that the children can use in both areas.

4. Be flexible with the placement of materials into learning centers or activity areas. By changing the location of a certain material, you may find that the children will rediscover it and want to play with it in a new way, combining it with other equipment. Water in the play house is great for doll, dish, and clothes washing. Put it in the sandbox and it is an experience in mud play and molding sand into shapes. At the creative media center, children can use water to turn powdered tempera into paints or food dyes into color mixing experiments.

5. Storage spaces where the children themselves can easily reach the equipment and put it away, offer opportunities for them to be independent and self-sufficient.

VIII. The teachers' (and staff's) role in setting up and maintaining an environment is extremely vital and can determine the degree of success or failure the children experience in learning. Although the learning center functions as a "teacher", it is not self-sufficient and is dependent on the teacher to ensure its workability. Learning centers are best used when the teacher has planned the activities and materials that will be available within them, and the children can use them on a self-selected basis during a specific, uninterrupted time in the day's schedule. Learning centers, however, can also serve a dual purpose as the teacher may wish to use their activities and materials for individualization, or s/he may use the learning center location as a setting for teacher-directed, small group experiences. Either way, the teacher assumes many responsibilities.

A. S/he decides <u>what</u> learning centers will be a part of the learning environment. A teacher's awareness of s/his preschoolers' skills and those which they need to develop, can help s/him to appropriately introduce materials and activities and expand on them. The information s/he receives from observing and assessing children forms the basis of what the learning environment should offer in experiences. A coordination between the written objectives for s/his children and the materials placed into the learning centers ensures that the program is responsive to the individual child's needs and strengths.

B. When the teacher has selected a topic, subject, skill, or interest as the basis for a learning center, s/he must then make plans for how the children will accomplish the skill or learn the information (eg. listening,

observing, experimenting, manipulating), and how they will apply it (eg. creating projects, playing games, "reading" books, dramatic playing, etc.). This takes the form of written objectives.

C. The actual creation of a learning center occurs as the teacher collects, locates and makes materials and equipment for the particular topic, skill or interest. The information written in Part VII of the Study Guide should help guide a teacher in the choosing of materials. Some qualities to look for in selecting and making good play materials are:

1. They are versatile - the playthings offer a rich range of play possibilities.

2. They stimulate children to do things for themselves. They involve them in exploring and creating.

3. They may be of a self-corrective quality (ie. the way the materials fit shows the child whether they were put together correctly). Self-corrective materials allow the child to evaluate his own efforts.

4. They are easily manipulated and handled, suited for the child's level of small and large muscle development.

5. They are warm, pleasing to touch and visually attractive.

6. They are durable, and will pass the tests that a roomful of children will give them.

7. They are safe and resistant to splintering, cracking, rusting, and tearing. Sharp edges are rounded and protected.

8. The construction of the plaything is simple enough for a child to understand. The mechanics are visual and easily grasped.

In summary, the materials choosen for a learning environment have integrity — they do what they're suppose to do, they're solid and have substance, and at the same time are attractive and inviting.

D. Once materials are collected, they need to be displayed in some organized way so the learning center can function as a complete unit. As discussed before (Section IV), particular attention must be given to the boundaries, size, location and numbers of children that will use the area at one time. Arrange the materials with these considerations, plus make the area:

1. Visually attractive.

2. Easy for the children to self-direct their learning.

3. Quickly straightened and cleaned. For example, label storage bins and shelves with a picture of what belongs in them.

E. An important step in ensuring the workability of a learning center, is the teacher's emphasis on presenting the new activities and materials in the learning center, and introducing to the children when to use them and where to use them, how to use them, and what type of care should be given to them. If the learning centers are introduced to the children

at the beginning of the school year, some guidelines and rules will already be established. This makes other rules of care for new materials and new learning centers easier to understand and follow.

1. Activities and materials in each learning center may be presented to the children before the actual allotted time for their self-selected play. Some teachers like to do this in small groups or at circle time.

2. The activities and materials must be introduced with good timing. When the teacher decides that s/his children are ready for a particular experience at the learning center s/he will plan and set up some of the materials providing for varying levels of difficulty and complexity. New activities and materials can be gradually added (and some replaced) as the teacher observes the way the children use them and whether the concepts need to be simpler, harder, extended, or varied in some other way.

3. In introducing the learning center's materials, the teacher will want to establish with the children some guidelines and rules. Children seem to function better when they have some influence on setting the limitations and care of the materials and activities. Rules should be posted and illustrated as a quick reference to children and adults. The teacher and adults in the classroom must also be good models of equipment care. Children show respect for materials when they see adults do too.

4. Children should be given adequate time to explore and play with the materials in each of the learning centers. To determine what is a good amount of time, the teacher must remember that children need opportunities to first select what they want to do (this may take a while if the child is not used to making choices, if there are many exciting and interesting learning centers to try out, or if nothing seems to catch his attention); then mess around, experimenting with different ways to play with the materials; and finally work until they have satisfactorily accomplished what they set out to do. These procedures may be repeated several times and at several different learning centers. In a 3-4 hour program, such as Headstart, learning center time should be at least a continuous hour long, and, if in combination with the outdoor environment, can be 1½ - 2 hours of uninterrupted time. This may sound like a long time but this is necessary for developing the child's attention span, becoming involved in the learning process, and carrying an activity out to a satisfying completion.

F. Having selected a topic, skill, or interest for a learning center, collected materials, displayed them, and presented them to the children, the teacher and adults now have two more very necessary roles: 1) facilitator, and 2) evaluator. Being a facilitator and an evaluator involves certain techniques and methods of interaction and observation of children. These teacher functions should be applied throughout the day.

1. A total learning environment which is well-planned, organized, and coordinated with both the group and individual objectives for the children helps the teacher as facilitator. Moreover, it frees the

teacher and staff to circulate among the children during learning center activities, to interact and promote individual self-directed learning.

a. A facilitator is a resource person who aids the child in his individual learning experience. S/he asks questions rather than provide answers, suggests and gives choices rather than demands, and respects and trusts the child's ability to learn and make decisions.

b. This time of interaction benefits the development of the whole child, as it:

- Promotes responsibility for making individual choices and decisions, and for taking care of materials and equipment.

- Promotes positive self-concept by recognizing and respecting individual styles and rates of learning and by providing sincere and appropriate reinforcement.

- Promotes problem-solving abilities in various settings which enables the child to become an independent thinker and thus be confident in his own ability to resolve problems.

- Encourages children to view their peers as potential resources.

- Fosters a child's ability to evaluate his own efforts and to value his own opinions.

2. As evaluator

a. The teacher is involved in a continous, informal process of observing, assessing and evaluating the child's interaction with his environment. This may take the form of anecdotal records, diaries, frequency and time checks, or on-the-spot, mental notations. The information from these informal evaluations is used as the basis for short-range planning.

b. Formal instruments of evaluation should also be employed and are valuable for more long-range planning.

c. Both types are necessary for identifying and meeting the individualization needs of the total program.

IX. Some suggestions for revitalizing the indoor learning environment are:

A. Add new learning centers on a temporary or permanent basis, according to developing skills and interests.

B. Remove those learning centers that have fulfilled their purposes to make room for other self-directed learning.

C. Alter the amount of space in a learning center, as the number of children showing interest changes, or as the activities within the learning center require more or less working area.

D. Change the learning center's location within the room to spark new interest and give a new perspective to the learning center.

E. Involve the children in deciding upon changes.

F. Move some versatile materials from one learning center to another to initate new uses for old and familiar materials. For example, switch the dress-ups from the homeliving area into the block area.

G. Remove materials that are not used and replace with ones that are more stimulating and developmentally appropriate.

H. Supplement your commercially made materials with those that are teacher, parent, or child-made.

I. Use open-ended or non-structured materials (eg. cartons, "beautiful junk", inner tubes) to encourage creative activities within the learning centers.

J. Repaint, touch-up, and use contac. paper to brighten-up dark areas or to provide additional color experiences.

K. Use wall hangings, mobiles, dropped ceiling effects, and suspended room dividers to break-up space within the room and offer new educational experiences.

ENVIRONMENT CHECKLIST

	YES	NEEDS IMPROVEMENT
STUDY GUIDE SECTION III		
1. Is there sufficient space for children to actively manipulate, explore and move around freely?	☐	☐
2. Does the movement of any children within the indoor room space interfere with other children's on-going activities?	☐	☐
3. Are there any areas within the room where the children tend to engage in non-constructive activities or behaviors?	☐	☐
4. Is wall space provided for both teacher and child (eye-level) use?	☐	☐
5. Is the room comfortable, warm, and friendly from the children's point of view?	☐	☐
6. Can noisy and quiet activities go on together without disturbing one another?	☐	☐
7. Are ceilings, windows and doors incorporated into the learning environment?	☐	☐
STUDY GUIDE SECTION IV		
8. Are activity and learning centers well-defined so that children know how these areas are to be used?	☐	☐
9. Is there a variety of learning centers which allow children to direct their learning at their own pace and style?	☐	☐
STUDY GUIDE SECTION V		
10. Is the outdoors used as an extension of the classroom?	☐	☐
11. Are activity areas, such as woodworking, block construction and creative media, set up outside as a regular part of the daily schedule?	☐	☐
12. Is the outdoors used throughout the day as a part of the total learning environment?	☐	☐

	YES	NEEDS IMPROVEMENT
STUDY GUIDE SECTION VI		
13. Are both spontaneous (informal) and planned visits made into the community?	☐	☐
14. Do community people visit the preschool environment to share their talents, skills and time with the children?	☐	☐
15. Do you and other staff obtain free or inexpensive materials from the community resources (parents, industry, public agencies)?	☐	☐
STUDY GUIDE SECTION VII		
16. Is there variety and richness of materials and equipment for children?	☐	☐
17. Do the materials call on the different abilities, skills, and interests of the children?	☐	☐
18. Do the materials throughout the room represent the cultural and ethnic background(s) of your children?	☐	☐
19. Is there a variety of materials for children to use to practice a particular skill?	☐	☐
20. Are materials added and exchanged to provide for new play experiences?	☐	☐
STUDY GUIDE SECTION VIII		
21. Do the learning centers meet the individual needs and interests of all the children?	☐	☐
22. Do the children have long, uninterrupted blocks of time to become actively involved with the materials?	☐	☐
23. Are materials organized in designated areas, to allow children to find and care for the materials independently?	☐	☐
24. Do you and other staff keep materials and equipment in good condition?	☐	☐
25. Do the materials function in ways they are designed for, and do they appear durable and solid?	☐	☐
26. Are new materials introduced with good timing according to need, interest, and ability?	☐	☐

	YES	NEEDS IMPROVEMENT
27. Is the physical environment well-organized to allow the Intern and other staff to spend most of their time in observing or participating with children?	☐	☐
28. Do adults act as resource people, encouraging children to resolve their own problems?	☐	☐
29. Are children encouraged to learn from each other?	☐	☐
30. Are children given opportunities to learn by exploring, discovering, and experimenting, rather than by receiving direct answers to their questions?	☐	☐
31. Are children encouraged to be independent and to direct their own learning?	☐	☐
32. Do the children have many self-corrective, as well as open-ended (versatile) materials to use independently?	☐	☐

STUDY GUIDE SECTION IX

32. Are new learning centers added on either a temporary or permanent basis?	☐	☐
33. Are children encouraged to supply or make some of their own materials?	☐	☐
34. Are certain versatile (open-ended) materials re-located to other learning centers to stimulate new uses?	☐	☐

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

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3. Day, Barbara. OPEN LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD. New York, Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975.

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7. Read, Katherine H. THE NURSERY SCHOOL: A HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS LABORATORY. Philadelphia, PA., W.B. Saunders Co., 1971.